

AI may reveal lost works of Aristotle

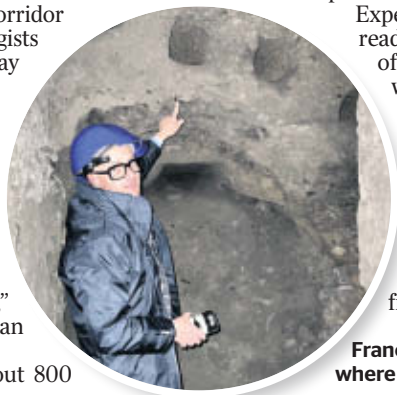
Italy

Tom Kingdon Herculaneum

Deep below a modern Italian city, there are niches dug in the wall of an underground corridor where archaeologists found scrolls that may change the world.

"The scrolls were so badly burnt, they were mistaken for lumps of charcoal and it took a while for them to realise what they had stumbled upon," Francesco Sirano, an archaeologist, said.

In the 1750s, about 800



Francesco Sirano shows where the scrolls lay

scrolls were retrieved from the Roman Villa of the Papyri, which was buried, like the rest of ancient Herculaneum, by volcanic mud when Mount Vesuvius erupted in AD79.

Experts were able to read only parts of a few of the scrolls, many of which were destroyed by attempts to unroll them.

That is, until last week, when three researchers used CT scans and artificial intelligence to virtually unroll a first-century BC Epi-

curian text on the pleasure of music and food — in particular, capers.

The breakthrough has given classicists hope that lost tragedies by Sophocles, unseen philosophical tracts by Aristotle or crucial Roman histories could be among them.

Many now want to dig beyond the 18th-century tunnels and fully excavate the villa. "We need to explore because it is the only known ancient library where texts have been preserved," Richard Janko, a papyrologist at the University of Michigan, said. "Until now we were told that if we found more scrolls we would damage them and be unable to read them. That has been taken away."

The scrolls read so far seem to be part of the collection of Philodemus, a follower of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, whose patron was Lucius Calpurnius

Piso Caesoninus, Julius Caesar's father-in-law and probably the villa's owner.

The large scale of the villa, more than 200m long, has convinced historians that the library would have been much larger and contained a far greater variety of Greek and especially Latin works.

"An average library at the time might have contained 40,000 scrolls, not 800," Janko said, pointing out that the son of the first-century BC politician Sulla had a library with autographed manuscripts by Aristotle.

"Philodemus refers to Aristotle's lost work *On Poets*, suggesting he had access to it, possibly in the Herculaneum villa's library, and it would be pretty spectacular if we find it," Michael McOsker, a research fellow in papyrology at University College London, said.

Aristotle was celebrated as a pioneer

in the study of logic, biology, ethics, cosmology, metaphysics and poetry, and his work was called a "river of gold" by the Roman philosopher Cicero, but his dialogues are all lost.

Sirano said that digging around the villa in the 1990s had endangered the site and more work could cost €150 million. "I love to dig but my job is to rediscover the history of a place, not hunt for treasure. Let's focus on the treasures we have — the 800 scrolls," he said.

Robert Fowler, from Bristol University, disagreed, claiming that part of the ground floor was unexplored, as was the basement, so a dig was crucial.

There was also, he said, the problem of Vesuvius erupting again. "Another eruption is overdue and it would bury everything again. If we can get into the villa now, I think we should."

ZHANG YIXI/VCG/GETTY IMAGES



Red dawn Fireworks greet the arrival of the year of the dragon in Luoyang, capital of China during the Sui and Tang dynasties in the 6th and 7th centuries. Lunar new year is the nation's biggest public holiday

It's a cellars' market for wine thieves

France

Adam Sage Paris

France's finest wines are cherished not only by connoisseurs but criminals too, it seems.

With prices reaching thousands of euros a bottle and rising demand from Russian oligarchs and a new generation of millionaires in Asia, a sophisticated black market has developed.

"There have been gangs stealing great Bordeaux wines for the past century," said Maître Julien Plouton, a lawyer who has defended suspects accused of wine thefts in prominent cases. "But since 2019 there has been a very big increase linked to strong demand on the Asian market, notably in Hong Kong and mainland China."

Last month La Tour d'Argent, a Paris restaurant, discovered that it had lost 83 bottles worth a total of €1.5 million. There was no sign of a break-in,

prompting speculation that the theft was either an inside job or linked to recent building work.

The restaurant, which is said to have up to 400,000 bottles in a cellar that contains one of the world's great collections, seems to have little clue as to when they disappeared. All it knows is that it must have happened at some point between 2020, when one inventory was completed, and the start of this year, when another was undertaken.

Aymeric de Clouet, an expert who oversaw an auction of 18,000 of La Tour d'Argent's bottles in 2009, said the thieves had been blinded by greed. Among their haul was at least one bottle of Romanée-Conti, the most sought-after Burgundy. It is valuable: a bottle of the 1945 vintage fetched £439,000 at auction six years ago. But it is also difficult to sell, he said.

"It is the one vineyard you wouldn't want to take because they number all

their bottles and know exactly who buys them," he said.

Most other wines are much harder to detect on the black market. "They are not like cars with number plates on them," said Christophe Chateau, of the Bordeaux Wine Council. He said that vineyards had started using technology to fight fraud, such as putting microchips in labels, but added: "The truth is that it is very difficult to know whether a bottle of wine has been stolen or not." Chateau said that robbers nowadays often decided that wine cellars were a better bet than banks.

In Paris, too, thefts are increasingly common, and not only in restaurants. De Clouet believes that up to 10 per cent of the city's blocks of flats have had their cellars raided by gangs looking for bottles in recent years. Some of the wines are sold outside France, although many are offered at bargain prices to restaurants.

Hungary president resigns over paedophilia pardon

Hungary

Oliver Moody

The president of Hungary has been forced to resign after it was revealed that she had pardoned a man convicted of helping to cover up paedophilia in a children's home.

The scandal over Katalin Novak's decision has rattled the government of Viktor Orban, the authoritarian prime minister, who has put family values and the protection of children at the centre of his conservative pitch to voters.

For reasons that remain unclear, Novak included the man on a list of convicts who were pardoned during the Pope's visit to Budapest last April.

The man, named by independent Hungarian media as Endre Konya, had been a PE teacher and the deputy dir-

ector of a children's home in Bicske, near Budapest. In 2019 he was jailed three years and four months for having abetted the home's director in covering up the sexual abuse of two children by their foster parents.

The pardon also lifted a five-year order that prevented Konya from working in any capacity with under-18s.

Thousands of protesters called for Novak's resignation last week after her action was disclosed by 444.hu, an independent news website.

Orban initially responded by distancing himself from the decision and promising to amend the constitution to ban pardons in such circumstances.

Novak apologised and resigned on Saturday, saying she had "made a mistake" and had wrongly believed that Konya had not abused his position.